Retention and Social Promotion

Neither retention nor social promotion are adequate strategies for meeting the needs of students who are at risk of failure.

Shane R. Jimerson and Tyler L. Renshaw

Seven weeks before the end of the school year, a principal receives a call from the eighth-grade counselor. Alejandro, a 14-year-old in grade 8, is struggling in most of his classes, and his behavior and attendance have presented challenges. Teachers report that he generally seems to pay attention in class but does not seek extra help. His work is sporadic and often below grade level. According to his records, Alejandro moved three times in elementary school, was retained in second grade, and has struggled academically throughout middle school. Calls home have not been returned. Alejandro and 10 other students are at risk of being retained and the student support team has met to explore alternatives.

Overview

Grade retention has long been viewed as a logical, fairly straightforward strategy for students who are achieving below their grade level or experiencing chronic behavior problems. Increasingly, it also is viewed as a preferable alternative to social promotion. Some educators and administrators believe that giving struggling students another year to mature academically, behaviorally, or socially will help them. Other school leaders believe that grade retention is necessary to meet their schools' annual yearly progress (AYP) and other performance mandates. An increasing number of states—such as Arizona, Colorado, Florida, and Indiana—have introduced or passed legislation making retention in grade 3 mandatory for students who cannot read at grade level.

Research reveals that neither grade retention nor social promotion alone is an effective strategy for improving students' academic, behavioral, and social and emotional success. Like so much in education, what is most effective is a targeted approach that addresses students' academic, social, and mental health issues and links specific evidence-based interventions to a student's individual needs (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Elliot, 2002; Shinn & Walker, 2012).

Effects of Grade Retention

Decades of research indicate that grade retention has numerous deleterious effects on student performance and long-term outcomes, and the empirical evidence fails to reveal any advantages of grade retention.

TEMPORARY GAINS

Academic achievement may improve during the first year after grade retention, but achievement gains typically decline during subsequent years. Students who are retained typically do not improve long-term, do not automatically catch up to their peers without targeted intervention, and perform more poorly than other low-achieving students who were not retained. (Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006)

NEGATIVE IMPACT ON ACHIEVEMENT AND ADJUSTMENT

Retention is associated with negative outcomes in all areas of academic achievement (particularly reading, math, science, and language arts) as well as in social and emotional adjustment (such as peer relationships, self-esteem, and problem behaviors) (Jimerson, 2001). In addition, retained students typically have a more negative attitude toward school and higher absenteeism than nonretained students (Jimerson, 2001).

NEGATIVE LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Retention is predictive of emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relations, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug abuse, early sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors during adolescence

(Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007).

Failure to complete high school. Retained students are 5–10 times more likely to drop out of high school than nonretained students (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002).

Consequences during adulthood. Individuals who have experienced grade retention are less likely to receive a diploma by age 20 and are more likely to be unemployed, live on public assistance, or be in prison than nonretained individuals (Jimerson, 1999).

IS GRADE RETENTION EVER EFFECTIVE?

Although a few students may benefit from grade retention, there is no proven method for predicting who will and who will not. Students experiencing difficulty in school because they lack learning opportunities, rather than ability, are often considered to be among those most likely to benefit from retention. Few studies, however, have identified specific factors associated with increased likelihood of favorable outcomes (Ferguson, Jimerson, & Dalton 2001).

In addition, although some educators and parents believe that grade retention is more effective in earlier grades than later grades, the preponderance of empirical evidence reveals that retention is ineffective across grade levels (Silberglitt et al., 2006). But given the numerous negative outcomes associated with retention, and the paucity of positive outcomes, retention is not an empirically supported intervention.

Considerations for Adolescents

Retention can have additional negative effects in middle and high school. Students who have already been retained may be experiencing consequences that impede their academic and social engagement, such as poor peer interactions, an aversion to school, behavior problems, and poor self-concept. They are also more independent, less likely to have close parental supervision over their homework and social experiences, more easily in a position to skip school, and more likely to have greater access to negative influences in the community and online. All of this can add to the barriers between the student and learning and can escalate the potential for failure. (Shinn & Walker, 2012).

Educators and administrators may need to consider placement for students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. In some cases, those students have already been retained. The pressure on students and staff members can intensify as the opportunity to make up for lost ground before graduation narrows, and retention might seem like the best answer. In all cases, engaging the adolescent in the problem-solving process and helping him or her take ownership of his goals are essential to effective interventions.

Alternative Intervention Strategies

There is no silver bullet that effectively addresses the needs of all students who are at risk of being retained. Administrators are encouraged to

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Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at www .nasponline.org/resources/principals.

Common Characteristics of Retained Students

Some groups of students are more likely to be retained than others. Student risk factors for retention include:

- Being from a high-poverty or a single-parent household
- Being an English language learner
- Being a Black or Hispanic/Latino male
- Being younger than same-grade peers
- Having parents with low educational attainment
- Having parents who are not involved in school activities and do not interact with teachers
- Making frequent school changes
- Having chronic school absences
- Having delayed development or attention problems
- Having low self-perceptions of academic or social competence
- Displaying behavior problems or aggression
- Having difficulty with peer relationships
- Having low academic achievement (especially in reading and language arts)
- Having high-conflict relationships with teachers
- Displaying multiple risk characteristics.

work with their school psychologists and other student and instructional support staff members to develop a system to identify students who are at risk and to provide appropriate specific interventions as well as training for teachers and parents.

The most effective alternatives to retention and social promotion focus on prevention, early intervention, and intensive targeted interventions. In many schools, response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) models facilitate the kind of problem-solving and progress monitoring approaches needed. The following general recommendations can easily be integrated into such models.

SCHOOLWIDE INTERVENTIONS

The goals of schoolwide interventions are to provide a context within which students who are at risk of failure are recognized early and receive appropriate interventions; to create a safe, positive school climate; and to provide a seamless set of supports that integrates as necessary across classes and intervention tiers and between home, school, and community.

Interventions should include:
- Early assessment to identify struggling students at the beginning of the school year. The intervention and progress-monitoring process should begin as soon as possible.
- Student support teams to assess and identify specific problems, implement empirically supported interventions, and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions.
- Data-based decision making to facilitate student success that

includes screening, progress monitoring, documenting of targeted interventions, and determining whether sufficient progress is being made toward key objectives.
- School-based mental health programs to promote social and emotional adjustment.
- Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs to promote the development of academic skills.
- Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors to promote academic and social skills. In particular, identifying an adult mentor whom the student trusts can help improve a sense of school connectedness.
- Meaningful opportunities for students to explore career and postsecondary options and develop goals and a realistic plan for achieving those goals.
- Comprehensive, schoolwide PBIS programs to promote the psychosocial and academic skills of all students (involving collaboration between general, remedial, and special education teachers).

CLASSROOM-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Classroom interventions reinforce individualized instruction, positive behavior, and frequent progress monitoring. The school psychologist can help teachers assess learning needs, evaluate data, and adjust instruction appropriately, as well work with students to help them take an active role in their learning and goal setting.

Interventions include:
- Research-based and culturally sensitive instructional strategies

to promote an optimal learning environment

- Behavior management and cognitive-behavioral strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems and increase academic achievement and prosocial behavior
- Systematic assessment strategies (such as progress monitoring and formative evaluation) to enable ongoing evaluation and modification of instructional interventions
- Assistance from specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., school psychologists, social workers, and administrators) to access resources and expertise to address unique student needs
- Materials, structured activities, and guidance for parents and others who can support students as well as additional opportunities to develop academic or social skills.

HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Family engagement in students' school experiences is a strong protective factor against academic failure. Interventions promote understanding and lower barriers, equip parents and others to better support students academically, and facilitate access to community services.

Interventions include:

- Frequent culturally and linguistically sensitive communication between home and school about students' goals, activities, and progress
- Materials, structured activities, and guidance for parents and others who can support students with additional opportunities to develop academic or social skills
- Home or other after-school supervision of assigned homework
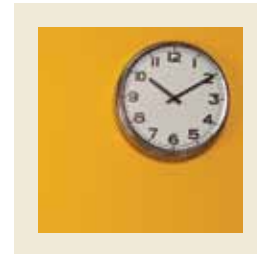
Interventions promote understanding and lower barriers, equip parents and others to better support students academically, and facilitate access to community services.

Neither grade retention nor social promotion is an effective remedy for addressing the needs of students who are experiencing academic, behavioral, or social and emotional difficulties. Prevention and early intervention are the first lines of defense.

- Parent involvement in schoolwide and classroom-based interventions.

Conclusion

Neither grade retention nor social promotion is an effective remedy for addressing the needs of students who are experiencing academic, behavioral, or social and emotional difficulties. Prevention and early intervention are the first lines of defense. For students who are still on the edge when promoted, continuing and adjusting the interventions as necessary is important. Some educators refer to this as "promotion plus." Similarly, intensive interventions and progress monitoring are essential for students who are ultimately retained.

Many of the state laws mandating retention recognize that retention alone is ineffective and require that intensive interventions are part of the process. Secondary school administrators can also minimize the cumulative effects of retention by advocating for reducing its use in lower grades and for building an effective educational pipeline in the district that emphasizes evidence-based instruction and supports. No single intervention will address the diverse needs of all students; instead, schools should use a comprehensive approach involving multiple interventions. **PL**

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